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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 001077

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KWMN](#) [KU](#) [FREEDOM](#) [AGENDA](#)  
SUBJECT: FREEDOM AGENDA: MUNICIPAL COUNCIL CANDIDATE  
CRITICIZES PRE-ELECTION SECTARIAN/TRIBAL PRIMARIES

REF: 05 KUWAIT 2509

Classified By: CDA Matt Tueller for reason 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C) Summary and comment: Talal Dashti, one of twelve candidates in an election for a vacant Municipal Council (MC) seat, told Poloff March 26 he refused to participate in a pre-election Shi'a primary to choose one of the seven Shi'a candidates in the election to represent the constituency's Shi'a population and increase the odds of a Shi'a being elected. Dashti said other "open-minded" Shi'a candidates agreed with him, and the primary was not held. He reported, however, that the Al-Awazem tribe did hold a primary, which the Government did not prevent or sanction despite it being common knowledge. Dashti claimed the participation of women in the election for the first time since gaining the right to vote in May 2005 had a "significant" affect on campaign strategies, though he suggested the primary challenge was reaching more voters, not gearing campaigns to both genders. While he did not believe either of the two female candidates in the April 4 election would win, he seemed genuinely supportive of women's participation both as voters and as candidates. Dashti said he financed his own campaign, which relied heavily on calling and sending text messages to voters and visiting diwanias.

¶2. (C) The upcoming Municipal Council election will be the first time women exercise their right to vote. Kuwaitis are watching closely to see whether women will vote with their male relatives, as many in this conservative country suggest, or whether they will vote independently. Women's participation in the election will also more than double the number of voters and could indicate, albeit on a smaller scale, the impact a reduction in the number of parliamentary electoral constituencies would have on reducing the scope of electoral corruption. End summary and comment.

Shi'a Primary Would "Destroy" National Unity  
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¶3. (C) Talal Dashti, a Shi'a candidate in the extraordinary Municipal Council (MC) election to be held April 4 to fill the vacant seat of Abdullah Al-Muhailbi, who was recently appointed Minister of Municipality Affairs, told Poloff March 26 that "some groups" in his constituency urged him to participate in a pre-election Shi'a primary to choose one of the seven Shi'a candidates in the election to represent them and increase their chances of winning. He refused, arguing that "election primaries will (negatively) affect national unity and lead to a rise in sectarianism." "I am a Kuwaiti first, second, and third, then a Shi'a," he explained. According to Dashti, other "open-minded" Shi'a candidates similarly refused and the primary was not held.

¶4. (C) While unofficial elections are prohibited in Kuwait, they do occur, particularly among Kuwaiti tribes. Dashti said the Al-Awazem tribe had already held a primary, choosing Yousef Al-Suwailih from 22 other Awazem candidates to represent the tribe in the election. He explained the Awazem had conducted the primary by placing ballot boxes in tribal leaders' diwanis, and that, while widely known, the Government had done nothing to stop the primary or censure the tribe afterwards. Dashti predicted that "80% of the Awazem" would vote for their tribal candidate, giving them a substantial electoral advantage. (Note: Abdullah Al-Muhailbi is also from the Awazem tribe. End note.)

¶5. (C) According to Dashti, the total number of voters, including women, in the fifth MC constituency is 28,000. Of this number, Dashti claimed 14,000 were Shi'a, 5,600 were Awazem, and 7,000 were from other Sunni families. In each group, he said women outnumbered men. In the last MC election in June 2005, Dashti said there were only 9,000 voters total. There are currently 12 candidates for the election, two of whom are women. (Note: There are ten Municipal Council constituencies from each of which one member is elected. Six Council members are also appointed by the Government; two are currently women (reftel). The next regularly scheduled MC election will take place in 2009. End note.)

¶6. (C) While criticizing pre-election primaries, Dashti acknowledged that it would be difficult for a Shi'a candidate to be elected without one, even if, as he predicted, the number of Shi'a candidates dropped to "three or four" prior to the election and "80% of Shi'a" voted for one of them. The Awazem had a chief who could direct the tribe to vote for a particular candidate, while Shi'a allegiances were divided

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among different marja (religious leaders), Dashti observed. All the same, he reiterated that he would rather lose the election than hold a primary that "destroyed" national unity.

#### Participation of Women Changing Campaign Strategies

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¶7. (C) The participation of women in the elections for the first time since gaining the right to vote in May 2005 had a "significant" impact on campaign strategies, Dashti said. Since diwanis (traditional gatherings) tend to be male-dominated, Dashti said he opened a separate female diwaniya where his female relatives could campaign on his behalf. Females friends/relatives also helped by calling female voters individually and "introducing them" to Talal. He suggested, however, that the greatest challenge of women participating in the election was reaching a greater number of voters, not gearing campaigns to both genders. Dashti predicted women would not/not vote in large numbers for the two female candidates, and doubted either would win, arguing they needed more political and election experience. Overall, however, he seemed genuinely supportive of women's participation both as voters and as candidates.

#### Campaigning Kuwaiti-Style

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¶8. (C) Dashti explained that much of his campaigning relied on calling and sending text messages to voters, erecting billboards, and visiting diwanis, of which he said there were more than 400 in his constituency. He said he was helped by 11 core campaigners and 300 family and friends. Dashti said he financed his own campaign, which was "very costly," particularly the campaign billboards and flyers and the cell phone/text messaging expenses. Professing to know his constituency "house by house," Dashti claimed he could predict how many votes he would receive by family. Ultimately, though, Dashti's primary support seemed to come from the electoral base his father, an influential Shi'a businessman, had built up during two separate, unsuccessful

election campaigns.

Bio Note

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19. (SBU) Talal Dashti was born in 1976. He received a B.S. in Civil Engineering from a university in Omaha, Nebraska, and an M.S. in the same field from a university in Vienna, Austria. In addition to owning his own business, he serves as Executive Vice President for the World Trade Center in Damascus, Syria; the Deputy Chairman of Top Industries Company; a Board member of Markiz, a real estate investment company; and a Board member of the Jaber Al-Ahmed Equestrian Academy. Talal is also a member of several Arab and international equestrian organizations. His English is fluent.

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